

Sarat Chandra Debo

LALIT KALA SERIES
OF
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

After publishing five monographs in bigger format the Lalit Kala Akademi has decided to go back to the smaller size. This series dealing with contemporary Indian Artists is being undertaken by the Akademi with the intention of popularising the work of India's leading artists. In conformity with the general policy of the Akademi these pocket books will be sold on a no profit no loss basis. Each publication will contain a short note introducing the artist and his work to the public at large.

Rs. 20.00

Sarat Chandra Debo

LALIT KALA AKADEMI
NEW DELHI
1992

Dinanath Pathy

Dinanath Pathy was born in 1942 in Digapahandi, Orissa. He obtained Ph.D. degree in 1982 from Utkal University and second Ph.D. from Visva-Bharati in 1992. He is considered an expert on Traditional art of India and has worked extensively on various traditional forms of art. He has curated some of the major exhibitions on traditional art in India and abroad. Dr. Pathy is a prolific Painter and held his retrospective show in Delhi in 1991. He has travelled widely in Europe.

Asstt. Editor (C)	Amit Mukhopadhyay
Production Officer	Y.N. Bhargava
Layout	Vikram Mehra
Photographs	Prabjit Singh, D.N. Rao, B.B. Sahu



Published by Prof. B.P. Kamboj, Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi-110001 and printed by Nu Tech Photolithographers, Shahdara, New Delhi-110095.



Sarat Chandra Debo

Born with a silver spoon in mouth in the royal family of Chikitigada in southern Orissa, Sarat Chandra died a miserable death in the dilapidated palace of Chandraprabhashram at Berhampur. He left behind a legacy which casts its marooned shadow on the contemporary art scene of Orissa and inspires the younger generation to lead the movement which he had left unfinished. His life of sixty two years (1911-1973) is a symbol of dedication to the cause of art in Orissa.

Sarat Chandra had been greatly influenced by the rich cultural traditions of his family. His father Radhamohan Rajendra Debo was a celebrated poet and dramatist. The royal family of Chikitigada have unique contributions in the field of literature, drama and music. Radhamohan's literary works are valuable treatises in lyrics, dramaturgy and rhetorics.

The beautiful rural ambience of south Orissa, its cultural heritage well portrayed in mural paintings, wood carvings and textiles and its traditional values had a deep impression on the inquisitive mind of Sarat Chandra. The green and golden paddy fields, clustered hamlets beneath the mango groves or in stately coconut gardens, ravaged riverines, dwarf bare hills of dark violet and gray have influenced the creative sensibility of young Sarat Chandra. In later years these picturesque

settings often provide backdrops to his figurative compositions.

Chikiti was a Zamindari under the Madras Presidency. The rajas of the Zamindaris of Southern Orissa had dual responsibilities of maintaining the traiditions of the place while proving their allegience to the British administrators who were the real rulers. Sarat Chandra was brought up in the aristocratic atmosphere of the royal palace. He had English tutors to rear him up as a saheb. He soon got himself adept in royal past times like horse riding, hunting, polo, tennis and driving. Sarat Chandra slowly emerged as a young prince with his committment to the cultural ethos of his country and people with a modern outlook and orientation for openness and global understanding.

Young Sarat Chandra started his artistic career as a theatre curtain painter, costume designer and make up boy of the royal theatre company which used to stage his father's plays. His association with theatre groups enhanced the quality of play production and helped Sarat Chandra to understand the psyche of the royal people.

After the death of his brother Goura Chandra, Sarat Chandra refused to ascend the throne of Chikitigada although his cousin was a minor at that time. The artist in him prefered to assist his cousin in the administration of the estate. This provided him with a rare opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the life of the people. His direct communion with village atmosphere enriched his art imageries and sensibilities. He used to ride miles and miles on horse back amidst picturesque landscapes of South Orissa to supervise collection of taxes. But the artist in him converted administrative outings into study tours and he started painting the nature in watercolours.

At the age of twenty three, Sarat Chandra sailed to London to study Bar-at-law at the Inner temple. But Law proved to be too rigid and colourless and did not interest him. He prefered fine arts to Law and joined the Heartherly School of Arts. While studying fine art in London he travelled extensively to Art galleries and Museums in France, Italy, Germany and Spain. These visits provided impetus to understand and appreciate western classical and modern art. Besides fine arts he took keen interest in social activities like helping Indian students in their academic pursuits. He was elected Secretary of the Indian Student's Union. Due to his sincere efforts Oriya was included for the first time in the teaching curriculam in the London University.

After completing his Diploma course in London, Sarat Chandra returned to India in 1938. The contemporary art situation in Orissa was simply deplorable. Years of misrule added with famine and poverty had shattered the fabric of one time glorious Orissa. Orissa which had just become a separate province only in 1936 was in the thick of the Freedom struggle. And yet the Artists in Orissa in their anxiety to become modern were either following the western academic styles mostly practised in Calcutta art school or the revivalist trends of the Santiniketan School. Orissa which had and still has a strong artistic tradition alive in its exquisite temples, patapaintings, textiles and handicrafts. The mood of the people in early forties was for total rejection of westernism. But only a very few artists responded to the mood. Although Sarat Chandra had been trained on Western academic style, he had not forgotten the very roots of Indian art. He was determined to pursue a style with the flavour of the indigenous substance but bathed in contemporary world art norms.

His ambitions were also conjoined by intense patriotism for the land and princely exclusiveness.

Sarat Chandra strived to infuse Indianess into his creations. His synthesising approach to bring in a happy marriage of eastern theme with westernism and gradually enveloping other areas of aesthetic vocabulary, did add credentials to his personal idioms. He pursued a style of eclecticism. He had before him the example of Raja Ravi Varma who like Sarat Chandra was an artist from the royal family. Synthesizing traditional theme with contemporary was not new to the Indian art scene. What had happend decades before in other parts of the country started taking shape under the stewardship of Sarat Chandra in Orissa.

Sarat Chandra could not reach the subtle grace and vivacity of Ravi Varma's paintings. But what made his art significant was his use of folk renderings. Here while differing from Ravi Varma he brought his art nearer to the art of the Orissan Chitrakara. In Sarat Chandra's paintings there is a pronounced linear tendency, a flair for construction of forms, a rare ability of organisation of space and sequences and a distinctive anatomical equation which was his own. His figures are archetypes of certain generic characteristics. His compositions are based on regimentation of idealistic symbolism. He is superb in portraying various moods in a dramatic representation of forms and colours. His is a peculiar approach to images in three dimensional characters at the same time with flexed contours and strong colours. He drew heavily on his experiences of the life style of the rural people. For him these people were the symbols of vital life and the freedom of spirit. At the same time he was irresistibly drawn to people who were trading the path of renunciation and non-attachment, the path of spiritualism.

Sarat Chandra'a paintings may be analysed in two groups for understanding the psyche of the artist. The first group of paintings executed before the fifties include mostly the studies of nature like landscapes, seascapes, hillscapes, trees, buildings and the studies of human life like family portraits and portraits of royal personalities. His studies both in oils and water colours make hardly any distinction in the response to mediums. His approach remained unilateral and his techniques of colour application and brushing remained more or less the same disregarding either transparency or opaqueness of the medium.

These studies are naturalistic with a deep sense of idealistic symbolism. His trees, hills, mountains and waterscapes no doubt retain the characteristic appeal but gets transformed into images of personal idioms. His studies are a kind of obsession in transforming nature into personal vocabullary which continued with him even after he was more drawn to creative compositions.

The second group of his paintings are mostly the temperas and watercolour washes. The artist by this time has become more of an introvert and depended on narrative symbolism. He painted from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata as well as from Bible. As he was extremely sensitive to human problems, he had no bias for any specific religious themes in his paintings. He was open and catholic in selecting his themes. This second group of his paintings are rather large. He was so overtaken by the creative urge that he never bothered or had the time to prepare suitable grounds for paintings. Most of his paintings therefore have decayed fast. The group of paintings are bold, bright, fresh and reminiscent of mural traditions.

His selection of colours in bright and method of application recalls revivalist school of wash paintings

in which the focal point is created with fresh application of colours, while the rest of the area is given a subdued colour tonality. In his large compositions, colours have been applied in such a fashion that only the focal point of the picture is dynamically visible at the outset and the whole narration comes within the purview of the eye subsequently. Following this tradition Sarat Chandra has applied vermilion to the cloth of the central figure Maya in "Birth of Sloka Chhanda" rose white to the apparels worn by all the five figures—Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Satrughna and Sita in "Rama's Pratyarvartana" paintings and deep red to the standing figures of the front row of the women in the "Rhythm of the Paddy fields". He had developed certain rigid formulae to deal with colour perspective. I remember when the students used to show their nature studies in water colour and wanted his intervention, he would instantly rush into his bath room with the painting, throw it into the bath tub, give a few washes to take the extra pigment, wipe it with a turkish towel and then apply three shades of colour to bringout the depth of field. These colour washes were cobalt blue and rose maddar to the sky, distant hills and trees, yellow ochre to the trees of the middle ground and chrome yellow to the trees in the foreground. Similarly I have watched him first applying cobalt blue to the sky, distant hills, trees and then "take off" the horizon line with a dry brush and then add a little bit of rose maddar in the "take off" area to bring in a fusion needed for creating distances.

Sarat Chandra's unique contribution rests in the field of art education in Orissa. For the rejuvenation of contemporary art movement, he organised the Utkal Art Association at Cuttack in 1945. From the meagre grant he received after the abolition of Chikiti estate, he managed to organise the first art school in the state in his palace Chandraprabhashram at Berhampur. This was the Utkal School of Arts. He had the rare ability to sport and nurture talents. In those early days he had employed the famous portrait painter Muralidhar Tali as one of the teachers in his school. Each year he used to admit thirty students in his institution. To built up this institution, he spent most of his energy, time and money. His family kitchen often served food to the students and he himself as the Principal drove his students in his own car to Gopalpur for seascapes and to Chikiti for landscape studies. Such a sincere, noble and committed endeavour to spread art education is rare in the country. Sarat Chandra's interaction with Nandalal was extremely rewarding. He visited Santiniketan and wanted to build his institution in the lines of Kala Bhavan. To inspire and guide Sarat Chandra, Nandalal came to Berhampur in 1945 and visited the Utkal School of Arts. Nandalal's observations recorded in the visitiors Book is of significance even for todays Orissa.

"I was pleased to visit the Utkal school of Arts this morning and to meet its talented founder and Principal Sri S.C. Debo. It has always been a matter of surprise to me that a province with so much of artistic talent should be without a school of art. I hope that this new venture will fill up the gap and afford fresh impetus to local artistic talent in keeping with contemporary postwar development in Orissa". Due to financial difficulties and want of support this Institution was closed around 1953, Sarat Chandra took it in his stride and despite the deep sense of loss he must have suffered he never voiced any complaint either in private or public.

In 1957, the Government of Orissa established the first art school at Khallikote and invited Sarat Chandra to

head the institution. Khallikote a place of solitude by the side of Chilika lake and the palace which housed the school with large tiled halls, wide corridors, sprawling courtyards, honeycombed apartments for student's accommodation, English style bathrooms, stepped wells, imposing exteriors and impressive entrance surprisingly could not sustain the ideals of Sarat Chandra. But here in late fifties and early sixties the foundation of the contemporary art movement of Orissa was laid under the dynamic leadership of Sarat Chandra Debo. Two of his able colleagues Ajit Keshari Ray and Ananta Panda practically led the movement and with a small band of devoted students changed the art scenario and brought in the fresh air of contemporary outlook into the stagnant art scene.

In the prime of his artist career, his princely aloofness and lately his saintly detachment did not ever prompt him to participate in exhibitions or contribute to publications. He never believed in self promotion and never sold a painting for he considered paintings so dear to heart like one's spouse. Since his sphere of activity was confined to the elite and the royalty, it hardly reached the common man. Of course he had done a number of oil portraits commissioned by his relatives who were the ruling chiefs in the Zamindaris in Orissa like Kanika, Khallikote, Dharakote, Surangi, Tarala, Chikiti etc. Most of which have been lost in course of time.

For many artists, creativity is a means for name, fame and material achievement. But Sarat Chandra was an artist with a difference. In the true Indian tradition like a Silpi Yogi Sarat Chandra in his later life renounced even art which is physical and visual as he had earlier renounced the royal throne to pursue art. Material achievements had never bothered him because he was literally in milk and honey in life and therefore perhaps was able to give up all possession to lead the life of a recluse. He got incitiation from Swami Sivananda Saraswati in 1962 and gradually become more and more withdrawn from the wordly activities concentrating on spiritual contemplation and meditation. During this period he painted a series of portraits of spiritual leaders and Gods and Goddesses. In these renderings he has tried to achieve a vision of the inner soul translating his inner spiritual experience into visual forms.

In his own words "art is a long sadhana which if practised with a sense of dedication and non attachment leads one to self realisation. Study of nature is to transform our vision and to realise the other dimension of physical existence and derive spiritual pleasure in direct communion with the creator of the Universe." For him painting or a work of art is not something bound by the limits of canvas and colour, painting in the real sense is to transcend the nama and rupa (name and form) to a state of formless absolute bliss and happiness. The greatness of Sarat Chandra is that even without being abstract in his creative expression he could transform the personal energy into cosmic and his personal vision into a level of supra consciousness.

With the passing away of Sarat Chandra, a great painter, an art educationist, an able organiser, a sympathetic devout and spiritual soul passed away. He was misunderstood when he was alive for he was ahead of the generation he lived in and when he is no more, his vision inspires and lights the path of a generation in its creative pursuits.

Dinanath Pathy



2

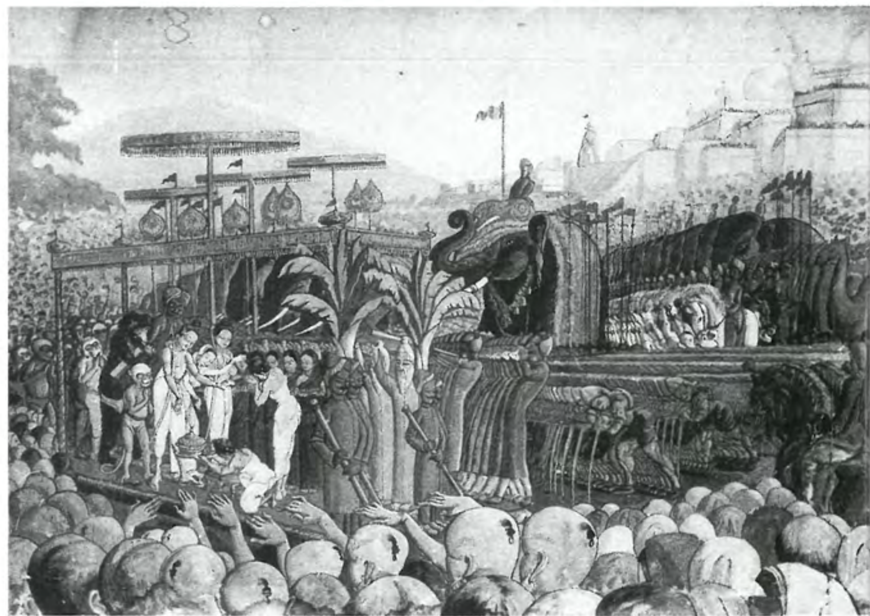
3



4



5



6



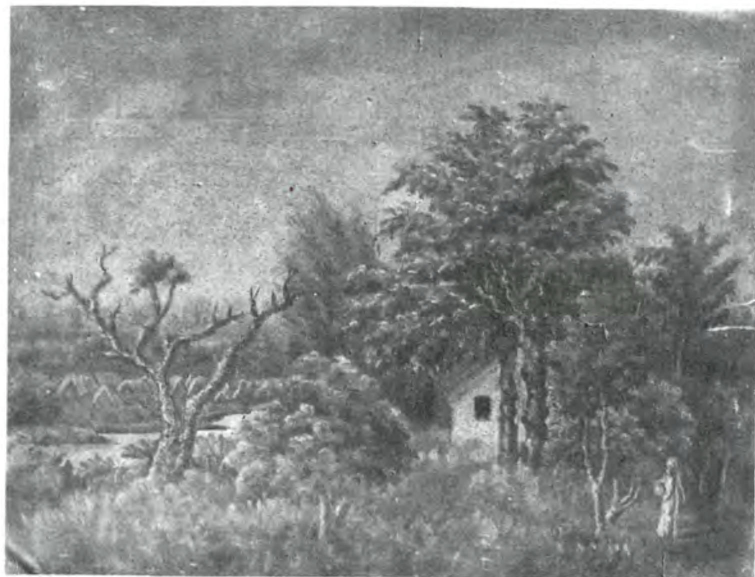
7



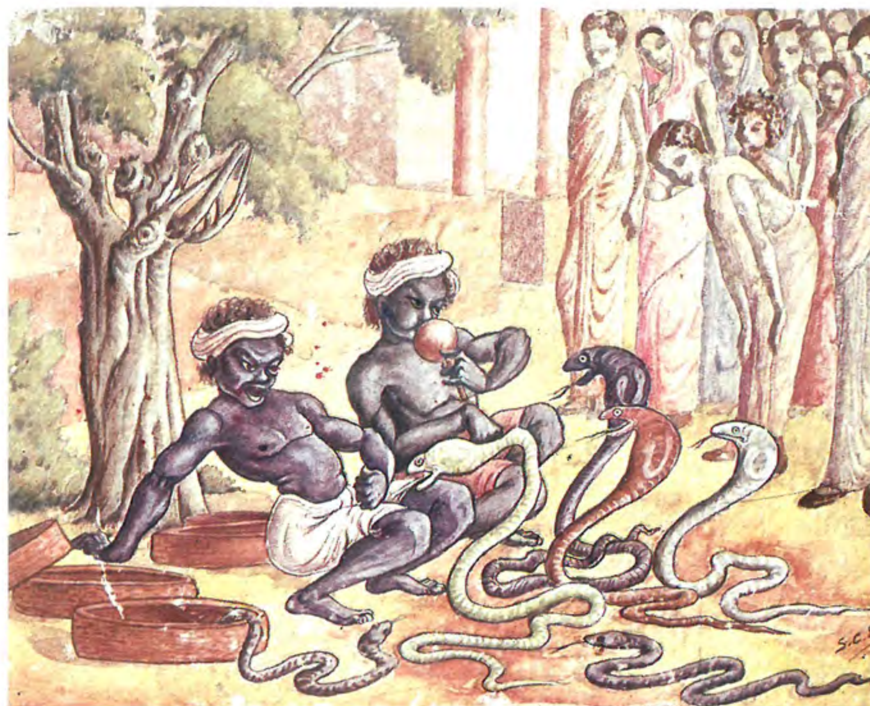
8



9



10



11



12



13





15



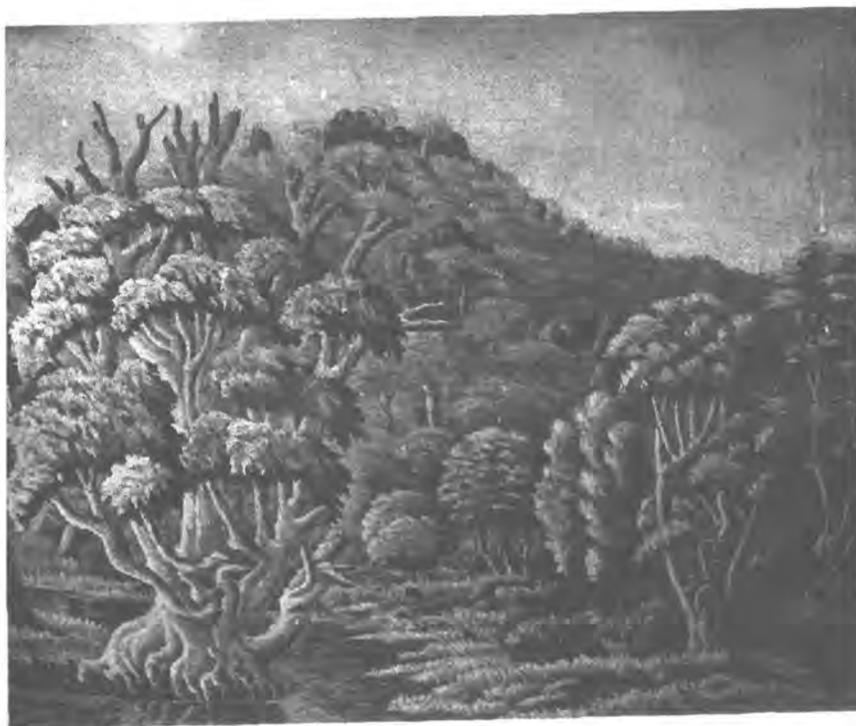
16



17



18



19

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Sl. No. 1 & 8 in collection of Orissa State Museum. Sl. No. 10 in the collection of Shri B.B. Sahu. All other paintings are in Artist's collection.

BIO-DATA

1911 Born in the royal family of Chikitigada in Ganjam District in Orissa.

1934 Went to London to study Bar at law but took admission in Heatherly School of Arts.

1938 Received Diploma in Painting from Heatherly School of Arts, London and returned to India.

1942 Married to the sister of king of Surangi.

1945 Formed Utkal Art Association at Cuttack

1945 Founded Utkal School of Arts at Berhampur.

1957 Appointed first Principal of Govt. School of Art and Crafts at Khallikote.

1962 Represented Orissa in the Central Lalit Kala Akademi.

1963 Received "Guru Bhakti Ratna" title from Swami Sivananda Saraswati at Rishikesh.

1967 Retired from the Govt. School of Art and Crafts Khallikote.

1966-68 President, Central Committee of the Divine life society

1970 Honoured by the Ganjam District Drawing Master's association with "Kalasri" title.

1972 Honoured by State Lalit Kala Akademi.

1972 Three of his best paintings acquired for the Orissa State Museum

1973 Died at Chandraprabhashram, Berhampur.